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A PLAN FOR OUTSIDE READING[1]

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Direction of the whole reading of our pupils is becoming more and more desirable, that the necessarily limited and inadequate class work may bear proper fruit. Though a pupil read Shakespeare and Milton in class, it will avail him nothing if his reading outside is vapid and cheap. Few of our pupils come from homes of culture. Their knowledge of, and interest in, good books may be placed at zero. It is the privilege of the teacher to awaken these minds to the beauties of literature. But he cannot do this successfully with simply the means provided by class reading. In fact, it has been my experience that pupils, on account of their peculiar feeling that anything read in class must be looked upon as a task, will get much more of a lasting love for literature from reading done outside, in which they have a larger latitude to choose the time and circumstances under which the reading may be done.

The mere posting of a list of books is the smallest part of a successful plan of outside reading. As everywhere else in teaching, the personality of the teacher must be brought into play, continually directed, not toward driving pupils to read by set requirements, but toward arousing their curiosity and interest so that they will wish to investigate for themselves. To accomplish this there must be a cordial feeling between pupil and teacher.

With these ideas in mind, the English teachers of the Crosby High School, some three years ago, introduced a plan of outside reading which has had all the earmarks of success. Frank talks with pupils outside of school and written opinions from pupils in school have convinced me that in this school, at least, the plan has more than justified itself.

The plan is very simple. At the beginning of the year a list of books is posted at the school and at the city library, from which

[1] Read before the New Hampshire State Teachers' Conference, May, 1912.

pupils are required to select one book a month. At the end of the month they are given a sheet of paper divided into four longitudinal sections. At the top they write their name and class. At the heads of the four columns are printed "Name of Author," "Title of Book," "Date," and "Remarks." The pupil fills in the spaces each month, recording as many books as he has read, although only one is required. Under "Remarks" he is told that he is expected to write whatever he thinks he would like to say about the book. It is impressed upon him that these remarks are to be purely informal. Cut-and-dried comments are discouraged. The pupil is made to feel that in filling out this sheet he is not doing a school exercise, but is making a record for himself, which he will bind and keep as a guide to later reading. Sometimes a pupil writes a single line under this heading, and sometimes a whole page. How much he shall write, or of what nature it shall be, is left to him to determine. The teacher suggests, however, that, as this is a record which will probably be consulted in later years, it might be well to say whether or not he liked the book, and to give a hint of the plot, that the written record may later recall the book to mind. I wish to emphasize the fact, however, that these are suggestions merely, and the pupil is at perfect liberty to follow them or not as he sees fit. In the opinion of the teachers the requirement of any formally planned remarks would largely nullify the whole system.

As this is a record which the pupil is filling out for himself, it is also impressed upon him that he should put down his honest opinion of the book, and not what he has heard others say of it, or what he thinks the teacher would like to have him say. It is pointed out to him that his opinion may or may not agree with the opinion of others. In the latter case there is room for suspicion, at least, that the trouble is with himself and not with the book. Still, people do have different tastes in reading as well as in everything else, and it may be that this particular book is not of the class which attracts him. Pupils are warned, however, not to condemn a book too hastily. If they have read it in the Freshman year and have not found it to their liking, they are encouraged to try it again in the Junior or Senior year, when their tastes in

reading are better formed. Many do later try a book which they have very much disliked in an earlier year, and find it quite the most delightful book they have ever read. There is nothing like an experience of this kind to teach a pupil that his standards of judgment are not yet formed, and that he should not be too quick to blame the book for lack of interest. Teachers often relate experiences of their own along the same lines. This does much to rid the pupil of the idea that he is supposed to like every book that is called a classic. Talks of this kind also make the pupil respect the openness and sincerity of the teacher. If a teacher professes to like every book on the list, although the pupil does not say so, in his heart he accuses that teacher of cant. He is right, too.

In fact, the teacher's influence in such a plan is one of the most important features. In our school it is planned to take at least one day a month from the regular work for a book-chat with the class. I used the word "chat" advisedly; there is no cut-and-dried recitation by the pupils or lecture by the teacher. It is a frank and friendly chat between the two. A teacher who has read widely and has a real love for books can exert an unbelievable influence. Here is the place for him to talk frankly of his own experiences in reading books—of his many attempts to read a certain book the first few chapters of which were uninviting, and of his perseverance until he finally reached a chapter where the book began to unfold and became so absorbingly interesting that he could not leave it until he had read to the very last page. Such a personal anecdote will impress on the pupil that he must not lay aside a book because it is not immediately interesting. He must persevere until he has read enough to form an honest opinion. To do less would be unfair to book and author.

In these very informal monthly chats the teacher also answers any questions pupils may care to ask. One of the most difficult questions to answer satisfactorily concerns the modern light novel. Many pupils who find Scott, Dickens, Cooper, and Jane Austen uninspiring become intensely interested in the latest "best seller." Naturally they cannot understand why a book which is anything but interesting should be praised so highly, while another is condemned or passed over in silence. With the boys the question

of the dime novel will often come up. Ridicule or scornful condemnation, as Arlo Bates has pointed out, is a poor way to meet the difficulty. If you condemn in wholesale terms books which your pupils know are absorbingly interesting to them, you will not make converts; you will simply lessen your hold on your pupils. They will make up their minds that your way of looking at things is so far removed from theirs that it is hopeless to expect you to understand. In the same way you might condemn football, but no healthy boy would eschew football on that account. He would simply wonder at you as a strange sort of creature, and keep right on playing. There is nothing that will lessen your influence more than to have your pupils feel that you are out of sympathy with them and do not look at things as they do. Much tact is needed to show a pupil that one book is a classic and the other is trash. I believe that a frank admission of the good qualities of the modern novel and a fair statement of its shortcomings in a way that will appeal to the pupil's own judgment is the only successful way to deal with this difficult question. Only the exceptionally sympathetic and tactful teacher will be entirely successful in doing this.

All sorts of questions are asked in these chats, and the teacher loses no opportunity to get his pupils interested in a particular book or author. I find little details of the author's life very often helpful. A sketch of the plot, or a recital of some particularly striking incident in the book also helps. Reading a chapter now and then should arouse curiosity and interest. Each teacher will use the means best adapted to himself; but every teacher should realize that upon his own personality rests in a large measure the success of the plan.

The hardest part of a plan like this, to work out with success, is the posted list of books from which pupils are required to select one book a month. At first we tried a very full and elaborate list of several pages, with books on travel, fiction, history, biography, science, etc., included. We hoped that we had provided for all tastes, however eccentric. We had our pains for our work; the pupils chose practically nothing but fiction. Do what we would, we could not get them in any numbers to read travel, biography,

or history. After a year's experience we frankly recognized the impossibility of driving them, and so lopped off all but fiction from the list. I should like to have my pupils read something other than fiction, but I have given up the attempt. Other teachers may find their experience directly contrary to mine; I can relate only what mine has been. There are teachers who succeed in getting high-school pupils to read for pleasure *Paradise Lost*, *Rasselas*, and even *Prometheus Unbound!* I can only hold up my hands in astonishment. Either these teachers and pupils are of a very unusual kind, such as I have never met in captivity—or the pupils are deceiving themselves and their teachers. It is very easy to be satisfied, and indeed edified, in this matter of outside reading. Every teacher of experience knows, or should know, that pupils have a most accommodating way of liking what they think they are expected to like, especially if their marks are affected thereby. It is easy for a teacher to think he is getting remarkable results, when, in fact, he is getting no results at all. Frank personal talks with his pupils and rigid probing of their opinions are necessary to keep a teacher properly balanced.

Our list, then, is now a fiction list. Last year I restricted it in the Junior class to a very few authors such as Scott, Dickens, Cooper, Holmes, Howells, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Thackeray, etc. My idea was that a short list would lead pupils to read two or more books by the same author, instead of roaming about the list in a desultory way. I impressed upon them that they could not express any opinion worth while on an author until they had read more than one of his works. I encouraged them to read several books by the same author before they passed on to another author. The reasoning, I think, was sound; but the pupils found the list too much of a restriction. I have enlarged it this year.

I find that pupils in reading fiction have little idea of character-drawing, and practically none of style. Their interest is wholly in the story. If there is a good story, it is a good book, regardless of slovenly style, caricatures rather than characters, or forced situations. They are also interested in the direct rather than in the symbolic story. This makes Hawthorne's books, delightful

as there are to us, lacking in interest for them. They want a plain, unvarnished tale, and Hawthorne gives them a highly elaborate web of fancy. Mistakes in making up lists of books for such reading occur very often because teachers do not realize that students are young and therefore undeveloped in mind. Many excellent books cannot be read by them at this time. Nor can they be expected to like the same books as their elders. We must carefully pick and choose the books best fitted to their undeveloped state. The others must be left for later years.

At the close of the school year I usually ask my pupils to write on a slip of paper their opinion of the plan. I tell them that I value their honest opinion, be it favorable or unfavorable. I also urge them to make any criticisms and suggestions that occur to them. Some of these criticisms I quote below, transcribing them with all their solecisms and crude constructions. I would say in justice to the pupils that they were written hastily in class. Teachers, I am sure, will more easily believe them genuine than if they were carefully edited beforehand.

Here is one from a girl of rather less than average ability and enthusiasm:

I think this idea of reading a book and bringing in a report every month, is a very good one. I have had two year's experience with this kind of work, and I find that it has helped me to read some good books that I never would have read otherwise. *David Copperfield* for instance. I don't think that I ever read a book that I enjoyed as much as I did this one. I would probably never think of reading this book, if I hadn't seen it on the list that we were to select from.

Here is one from a boy, one of the best in the class, who likes to think for himself:

At first I hardly thought this book business was going to be of any value—it seemed oppressive to think that you *must* read something. That in a way took away the pleasure in reading a book that otherwise would have been throughly enjoyed. But as the year went on, the burdensome part of it was lifted up, and now although some of the books I read are a real struggle, I feel in the end that this idea has been a beneficial thing. For, if I knew that I did not have to read some of these books, I am extremely sure that I would not have gone beyond Chapter 2, or hardly reached that far, and now that I have really read them, I have found that they were good after all.

This girl sees the value of keeping records for later reading:

I consider a book review as both interesting and beneficial. It is interesting to write your opinion of a story and, perhaps, a short outline of it, and it will certainly be interesting, in later years, to read the accounts you have given and contrast them with your later formed ideas of a book. It is also well, if at present you do not like a book, to re-read it later and see if it makes a better impression on you.

I know I enjoyed reading over the accounts of books I had read in my Freshman year, spending a whole afternoon reading and thinking over what I had written.

The following is from a boy who has a very pronounced bent toward science and mechanical contrivances. His definition of the dime novel I find especially refreshing. He is a very outspoken and manly boy, and to have him assert frankly that he was cured of the dime novel habit is worth a good deal in judging the results of this plan:

The direct object of the experiment failed partly in my case, but another result I think a great deal more important, has come out of it.

In the Freshman year we were compelled to read a good book each month. I did not like it. I was accustomed every week to go to the news-dealer and buy a "dime novel" as they are popularly called, and get myself excited in wonderful escapes, horrible deaths, blood-thirsty villians, clever heroes, and bad English. When I was forced to get a library book, I had to abandon one of my dime novels each month. But I found after I had read two or three library books, that they were made of infinitively better stuff, i.e., better plots, more reasonable characters, and better English. The result was that I stopped reading dime novels. My English is bad as it is, but what would it be if I continued reading trash?

Through this system I also got well acquainted with the ins and outs of a library, and I think that is also something I would not have gotten were it not for the monthly book review.

This girl sees the value in leading to thoughtful reading:

Furthermore, the fact that we are to write a review of the book makes us think about what we have read, so that now, no matter what book I read, I always, after finishing it, sit and think about it, pick it to pieces, etc.

Books lying on the shelves at home for years took on a new interest to this pupil:

I think that the reading of one book a month has been a pleasant and instructive task for me. I have read a few books that I should not otherwise have read; For instance, the *Tale of Two Cities* has been resting on a shelf at

home since I can remember. It had no pictures and the print was rather small, making the book look forbidding in contrast with the light novels I have been accustomed to reading through in an afternoon. Other girls at school were reading the book and curiosity and a sense of duty made me read it. The result is that I find Dickens' books a pleasure and intend to read more during the summer.

The discussion feature appeals to this one:

I have enjoyed the book a month plan very much this year. Not only has it brought me into contact with several books which I have liked, but it has also made me want to read more and has made me plan some reading for this summer that otherwise I should not do. I think the giving up of a period once in a while to talking about the books that have been read and are about to be read, adds much to the interest of English.

These opinions of pupils will show, I think, what the general feeling of the pupils themselves is toward the plan. Whatever criticism has been made by them is not very deadly. It is concerned with the time taken in reading, and the feeling of compulsion that goes with it. These are shortcomings, but no method is ideal, and this is far from ideal.

We believe that the love of good literature has been very much increased in our school by this plan. It has in many cases undoubtedly developed a desire to read good books in place of poor, and has very much increased the intelligence with which a given book is read. We have strong hopes that the desire for good literature thus awakened is no mere transitory appetite, but will grow during the coming years. This is too much to expect in all cases, but if three or four of our pupils become lovers of literature through our efforts, should we not be satisfied?